Methodolatry, Irony, Apricot Cocktails: Phenomenological Research as the Domestication of Phenomenology

Onel Brooks

SYNOPSIS

In our universities, and not only in our universities, it tends to be taken for granted that the term 'research' when used in relation to subjects such as psychology, psychotherapy and social work must mean or contain 'qualitative', if not 'quantitative research'. This article does not dismiss qualitative research. It claims that works making use of qualitative research, and phenomenological research in particular, can be interesting and thought provoking; but it argues that this is often in spite of rather than in virtue of this preoccupation with following research methods. The current situation with these strong but often unarticulated intuitions and assumptions about 'research' means that we are less likely to ask whether what is needed in a particular case is ' empirical research', 'more research', or something else, and in the latter case, what that something else might be. This article suggests that our current intuitions have much to do with our history, especially that dominant positivist and science-worshipping strand that reaches back before the Enlightenment; and that rather than being so concerned with following research methods in the areas mentioned above we might be more concerned with how we have acquired the intuitions, beliefs and opinions we have and why they are so attractive to us. It may be about time that we began to think more creatively about what we ask students in these areas to do in the name of 'research'.

Introduction

In my exchanges with my colleagues about qualitative research, I often hear the view that it is a way of trying to make sure that our research is not just our opinion, that it has followed a more 'objective' path. However, the notion of 'reflexivity', our reflecting on how we have shaped our qualitative research, already begins to put this idea in question. I am not sure about the argument that qualitative research may somehow save us from our own opinions and prejudices; it could equally be argued that this approach

helps us to stay with our own opinions and prejudices, our uncreative and thoughtless conformity to norms and the status quo, as it helps us to hide that this is what we are doing. I and my colleagues know of theses that have used a research method that was not familiar enough to the examiners, so in spite of the student producing a thoughtful, creative, self-reflective and well-read thesis, the examiners' preoccupation with research methods meant that the student needed to make 'corrections', which include her providing 'evidence' that the research method she has used has been used in other research theses. That is, there is more of a concern with her conforming to some sort of norm here. It used to be the case that at doctoral level we were more concerned with the student's ability to question norms, be creative, to think for herself.

Qualitative research proposals are approved by a committee, and surely this helps to protect the public and helps to make sure that the research that is conducted is valuable and not just somebody's opinion? I know of cases where proposals to conduct qualitative research on race and psychotherapy have been rejected by the committee, and eventually the claim is made that there is no evidence for the fact that there is racism in psychotherapy. So the committee has decided that there is no evidence that it is a problem, so they are not going to make it easy for anyone to do research that might be regarded as supporting the claim that there is a problem. It is hard to see this as having much to do with 'objectivity', and not being led by our opinions and convictions. Phenomenology began as a rebellion against the dominant ways of doing philosophy, against what we think we know, against building systems. It asks us to begin from where we are, taking an interest in how we constitute the world. It is concerned with authenticity, with our sense of our own responsibility, and it has something to say about fitting in with 'the they', with what 'one' does; it wants us to appreciate our involvement in the world. What is it doing getting itself involved with something called qualitative research, especially where qualitative research seems to be increasingly about fitting in, with 'the they', what Nietzsche would refer to as following the herd?

How Did We Get Here?

I often find myself thinking about how we got here, and why we seem so happy with the qualitative research industry. I look around for the debates about this state of affairs and what else we might be asking students to do when they are asked to do research. Perhaps these debates are taking place, but I have not been able to locate them.

What is qualitative research for? How did it become the case that in psychotherapy, psychology, social work and sociology, 'research' usually means quantitative or qualitative research? Am I alone in thinking that some study of philosophy, including but not only the philosophy of science and the history of this area of philosophy, is likely to make it very difficult to read books on qualitative research without wondering whether the only way to get this enterprise (qualitative research) off the ground in the first place is to refuse to think too much about some of the questions it raises and the assumptions it seems to make? Am I wrong in fearing that when something interesting comes out of a piece of qualitative research, this is largely so *in spite of* the so-called 'method' employed?

As well as asking myself the questions raised above, I have also found myself meditating on the following questions: when one reviews a book on phenomenological research, how much should one try to review the 'objective book', conceived as an object out there, as opposed to the meaning and significance of the book as experienced by the reader? That is, can we value a phenomenological review of a book on phenomenology, seeing this as something different from an attempt to convey 'objective' information about what can be found in the physical book out there? Can we be concerned with how the reader is involved with the book being read? Perhaps this distinction is related to the question of authenticity. A person may write a review or account that does the job, according to the current standards of how one reviews or writes about a book or paper, but, it can be argued, this is different from trying to write something about how he responded to the book as a finite being with his own concerns and interests, aware of his finitude. To say it in a Heideggerian way, I am concerned with what happens when I 'pass the book under the eyes of death' in my quest for trying to find out what is important to me and what I am responsible for. Perhaps we may say that the difference between the first and second responses to a book is that between putting our backs into things, and on the other hand, putting our hearts into things.

Finlay (2011) is an excellent book on phenomenological research, and this is why I refer to it in this article. Only an ungenerous reader could fail to acknowledge that Linda Finlay is often clear, interesting and inspiring, and the work covers so much of what falls under the heading of phenomenological research. House (2012) is a good review of this work. I do not wish to deny that conducting qualitative research can and does help to put people – the researcher and her subjects – in a place where this focusing and gathering of ourselves may be possible, and thinking in this sense may take place. There are many personal accounts in Finlay's book, such as 'The lived experience of being a

person with dementia' (Finlay, 2011: 131–2), or 'Living with multiple sclerosis', or 'A personal account of pain experience' (Finlay, 2011: 152–3) that seem to be just the sort of personal, candid and engaging accounts that might stimulate a person to think about what it is to be human, the variety of our experiences, as well as the similarities between us, which of course includes thought about our own selves and our lives. I am arguing that as much of the talk about methods seems to have little to do with how personal and moving these accounts are, nor with the degree of thoughtfulness given to them, it is not clear why there should be such concern with methods, proliferation of methods, and concern about following method.

The reader should not be misled. There are many pages where what Finlay presents us with is arresting, and unusual to some of us, but it seems important that we read and think about the matters she presents. There is, for example, a page about gay men who have unprotected anal intercourse. The participant tells the researcher, 'I was giving him my unprotected sex'; the participant speaks about how being in and making love with his long-term partner is what led to his being HIV positive (Finlay 2011: 143). There is an excellent page about someone who has cancer, and rather than collapsing he has found himself 'filled with desire' to live. This might be presented as an example of being passed under the eyes of death.

It should be clear that my argument is not that Finlay's book is uninteresting or that it is not thought provoking; my argument it that however amazing, moving, sobering or thought provoking these examples of phenomenological research are, it is not easy to see what they have to do with something called research methods, or why they need to be presented in this package.

Furthermore, I am claiming that like many of my colleagues, Finlay takes too much for granted. She does not question why and how the term 'research' has come to mean qualitative or quantitative research, when the term used to mean something much wider and less prescriptive. Like some of my colleagues, Finlay is not interested in, or questioning of, the notions of 'evidence' or 'data' or 'induction' in this area. This sort of vocabulary, it seems, can just be taken from the physical sciences and used without pause. Yet why would I be surprised when psychotherapists still talk about their account of their experience of being with a client as 'a clinical' and their discussion of their work as 'scientific meetings'? Does the matter need to be any plainer? Psychotherapists and psychologists can reflect, analyse and treat their clients, but they do not seem to be able to reflect on, analyse or treat this desire to present themselves as 'scientific' and respectable.

Doing Something Other than 'Empirical Research'

The questions that open Cioffi's 1998 book on Freud and Frazer may help the reader to be clear about some of what is troubling me. Cioffi writes, 'when is it a mistake to take our interest in a phenomenon in the direction of an enquiry into its causes and conditions rather than towards an enhanced grasp of the impression it produces, or the ruminations it incites?' (Cioffi 1998:1). What he goes on to say immediately is perhaps even more useful:

> How pervasive is the tendency to proceed as if a phenomenon called for empirical enquiry when what is really wanted with respect to it is clarity as to the sources of our preoccupation and, where appropriate, untroubled contemplation of it?'

I am more generally concerned with the impression books and papers produce, the ruminations they incite, with my preoccupations and space to explore these preoccupations.

It is easy to protest that I misunderstand, for qualitative research is not about causes and conditions but about meaning, so, therefore, this first question does not apply to it. However, it might be asked at this point why anyone would be interested in qualitative research if the very notion did not at least evoke promises of validity, consistency, reliability, ways of coming to know or being justified in our statements, rather than merely having opinions.

The second question seems to be more clearly a question that might be asked to those of us in the qualitative research industry: what do we make of this tendency to proceed as if what is needed is empirical enquiry, rather than an attempt to become clearer about our preoccupations and concerns, through contemplation without the distractions of qualitative methodologies to be followed? We might wonder whether this 'contemplation' is close to what Heidegger calls 'thinking' (Heidegger 1968). The translator of this work states in his introduction

> Thinking is not so much an act as a way of living or dwelling – as we Americans would put it, a way of life. It is a remembering who we are as human beings and where we belong. It is a gathering and focusing of our whole selves on what lies before us and a taking to heart and mind these particular things before us in order to discover in them their essential nature and truth. (Gray, 1968).

From undergraduate level to doctoral level, interesting, thoughtful, creative research is possible without recourse to something called qualitative research methods. Students need to read, discuss their topic with people who are able to speak with them about it, conduct interviews, reflect on these interviews, but it is not clear why we need them to be so preoccupied with qualitative research methods.

Qualitative Research as a Form of Idolatry

If the worshipping of idols is 'idolatry', the worshipping of methods might be referred to as 'methodolatry'. I do not think that we give enough thought to why we find ourselves in this position. I take the view that any account of how we came to be 'methodolators' needs to acknowledge that from about 1500 AD, the 'modern period', Europe's belief in its own superiority has been bound up with notions about its superiority in terms of thinking, its possession of Reason. To be modern seemed to mean that we reject or reform traditional ways, and use Reason to achieve more efficiently our identified ends (West, 1996: 7–8).

As David West put it,

> The West claims henceforth that its institutions and thought bear a privileged relation to a uniquely valid rationality, markedly reinforced pretensions to a universal truth already present in Epicurean and Stoic thought. Europeans come to see themselves as more modern, more advanced or more developed than peoples they now describe as traditional, backward or primitive – and whom they sometimes even see as being incapable of such development. (West, 1996: 9)

A crucial aspect of Europe's sense of itself as superior, its main evidence for its possession of Reason, was science and the technology that science makes possible; but once something called science is regarded as the acme of human achievement, as the area of culture that all other areas of culture must follow in order to be more 'rational', efficient and effective, it becomes more important to distinguish science from other areas of culture, especially from beliefs and ideas that others may want to present as scientific. This privileging of science, therefore, leads to preoccupation with the question of how to distinguish science from non science, and the apparently closely related if not identical question of distinguishing sense from nonsense. It also leads to attempts to define or be clearer about what science is; one way of answering this is to say that science is the result of following scientific method or methods. I am suggesting that this story, crudely told as it is here, marks the beginning of our concern with something called 'qualitative research'.

This is perhaps the most important theme in Europe's intellectual history, and it can be related to many things, such as empire and revolutions, and the notion of civilisation. A central concern in the history of Western philosophy is a preoccupation with distinguishing between science and non science, sense and non sense, and of trying to clarify why science works, one position being that this is to do with scientific method or methods. We see this in David Hume's fork: his dividing the products of human reason into statement that are to do with the relations of ideas – as in mathematics and logic – or statements that are to do with matters of fact – which concerns cause and effect (West, 1996:6). There is a clear and straight line from Hume's position to logical positivism and empiricism generally, with its insistence that there are analytic statements – true in virtue of their meaning – and empirical statements – true in virtue of facts. There is much to say about this and the argument between Thomas Kuhn and Karl Popper about how to distinguish science from non science or nonsense, with Popper claiming that what distinguishes science is that scientists make bold conjectures and try to refute these conjectures, and Kuhn claiming that what distinguishes science from other things is to be found in a description of how groups of scientists behave. I found it difficult to understand why Finlay seems to quote with apparent approval when she is writing about Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) that 'the writing needs to be bold and confident in presenting the interpretation of the unfolding evidence trail' (Finlay, 2011: 142). One way of making sense of it is to read it in terms of what Popper has to say about the mark of science: that is, it involves bold conjectures and equally bold refutations. I prefer what Finlay says on p. 9 about the researcher recognising her role in the 'co-construction of tentative data' and needing to 'explore these dynamics reflexively'.

There is much else to say, and this is not the place to try to say it. What needs to be said here is that this concern with scientific method, with acknowledging Reason in action, with separating ourselves from unreason, is far from unrelated to why we in psychotherapy, psychology and the social sciences now seem to take it for granted that research means either quantitative or qualitative research. If this is so then there is some irony in the fact that many Anglo-American philosophers have turned on this empiricist version of science – I mean Nelson Goodman, W.V.O. Quine, Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend and Richard Rorty, for example. So our current concern with qualitative research seems to indicate that we are still wedded to an outdated and discredited picture of what science is. It does seem to be ironic that, for instance, Feyerabend argues that method gets in the way of scientific progress, and that what is good for progress is greater freedom or intellectual anarchism, and Hans-Georg Gadamer claims that method does not lead to truth, and truth is not gained through the pursuit of method; but we still hold on to the notion of method in research into psychology, psychotherapy, social work and the social sciences generally. What would research in these

areas look like if we caught up with this conversation rather than stay with our empiricist intuitions about how to conduct 'research'?

This, however, is not the irony that I am most concerned with here. In order to get to the irony of my article's title I need to say something about an account of science and thinking that can be found in Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*. A country has 'a high level of civilisation', he tells us, when we find 'everything that can assist man in his exploitation of the land and protect him against the forces of nature' (2002). It is a matter of order and control: we are civilised when we change the courses of rivers, so that we have water where we want it, when we 'diligently' bring to the surface the mineral wealth that is below ground, so we can shape them into what we desire. We have fast and efficient means of transport; we exterminate 'Dangerous wild beasts' and breed domesticated ones, and so on (ibid.: 29). It seems that we are civilised when we follow the Cartesian view that science will make us the masters and possessors of nature.

It would of course be misleading to present Freud as simply a champion of civilisation so conceived, when in this work he is concerned to stress that civilisation costs us much in terms of our freedom, as we need to distort and repress what we are sexually and in terms of our aggression.

It should be noted that the tribe in the jungle or rain forest that lives in relative harmony with its environment for generations has to be 'uncivilised' in comparison to the group of people who want to build a highway through where this tribe lives, who will exterminate the tribe in the name of 'progress' and 'efficiency', and who will pollute and deplete the land. 'Civilisation' and 'progress' sometimes means a desire to turn ancient trees and rivers into car parks and shopping centres. What is most important for this review, though, is that the reader notes that this can be seen as part of the story of European superiority that has been around from at least 1500 AD and that has come down to us via the Enlightenment: science, technology, speed, efficiency, predicting and controlling our world, so we get what we want out of it, this is what we are for, this is what our thinking is for. In this context, we might say that our notion of research is too 'civilised', aspiring to control many things that need to be lived with and thought about, and that what we need is more 'uncivilised research'.

Overcoming Methodolatary

I fear, but of course I do not claim to have 'proved', that the current fashion for qualitative research, the idea that this is the only way to do research, is caught up in these dominant scientistic modernist notions of progress, efficiency, speed, method, verification and evidence. It needs to be said that this way of thinking is opposed to what I take to be the spirit of phenomenology. Phenomenology, as I understand it, is an attempt to return to 'the life of the living human subject'; it is an interest in the 'concrete lived human experience' (Moran, 2000: 5). Rather than beginning with theories, conviction, what we think we know, it is, as Nietzsche put it in the preface to *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*, concerned that what we think we know will get in the way of our experiencing and living. We must not, Nietzsche tells us, in 'the manner of modern human beings', bring our education in between us and the phenomenon (Nietzsche, 2004: 19). We see in Nietzsche, Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, for example, a concern with science and technology and how the modern world reduces the space for thinking, banishes slow meditative thinking that is an expression of the wonder we may feel about ourselves and the world, and reveres the means–ends, calculative thinking that gave birth to and dominates the modern world.

We might say that phenomenology is a powerful critique of our preoccupation with science and technology, and what phenomenology becomes when it is packaged as 'qualitative research' is something that is against the spirit of phenomenology, because qualitative phenomenological research is an attempt to get hold of phenomenology, simplified, step by step and packaged, made civilised, in order that it can be made to join in with the preoccupations of an age fascinated by science and technology that wants to turn phenomenology into a technology, a way of putting it to use, of making it 'function', making it 'useful'.

But, it might be asked, what is wrong with getting phenomenology to function, to be useful?

In Heidegger's *Der Siegel* interview, Heidegger says that he does not think that 'technology is in its essence something that human beings have under their control'. (Does he mean that technology and technological possibilities may well be what has us under its control?) 'Technology is in its essence something that human beings cannot master of their own accord' (Heidegger, 1966: 9). His interviewer, we hope, is playing devil's advocate when he claims not to be able to see what the problem is. He or she responds to Heidegger by saying

> One could naively object; What do we have to come to terms with here? Everything functions. More and more electric power plants are being built. Production is flourishing. People in the highly technological parts of the earth are well provided for. We live in prosperity. What is really missing here? (Heidegger, 1966: 10)

Heidegger's response is crucial. He states, 'Everything

functions. That is exactly what is uncanny. Everything functions and the functioning drives us further and further to more functioning, and technology tears people away and uproots them from the earth more and more.' And he continues,

> I don't know if you are scared; I was certainly scared when I recently saw the photographs of the earth taken from the moon. We don't need an atom bomb at all; the uprooting of human beings is already taking place. We only have pure technological conditions left. It is no longer an earth on which human beings live today. I recently had a long conversation with Rene Char in Provence – as you know, the poet and Resistance fighter. Rocket bases are being built in Provence, and the country is being devastated in an incredible way. The poet, who certainly cannot be suspected of sentimentality or a glorification of the idyllic, said to me that the uprooting of human beings which is going on now is the end if thinking and poetry do not acquire nonviolent power once again. (Heidegger, 1966: 10)

I am not concerned here with trying to say something to readers about what Heidegger meant by this statement, or how phenomenology and German philosophy is related to Romanticism. I am making a case for saying that in its focus on our individual experiences in the world and the peculiar position we are in as a part of the world that can think about the world and ourselves in it, phenomenology is part of the challenge to a world that is increasingly concerned with speed, efficiency, effective means for getting what we want, control, and that everything and everyone should be a part of this functioning. When students learn enough so that they can conduct phenomenological research in order to get a higher degree in the shortest time, there is an irony in talking about the phenomenon being 'allowed to show itself at its own pace, in its own way' (Finlay, 2011: 127). This is not my experience of what is currently the case in qualitative research. They want to get it all done as soon as possible. They protest that phenomenological writers are hard to read. They want to know how to 'apply' the ideas, and to do this quickly. It seems as if what is most important here is efficiency and being able to function in the market place for those with doctorates.

Phenomenology, perhaps like so many things, began as a revolt and potential revolution. I worry that phenomenological research is not something that continues this passionate, thoughtful and exciting engagement with how we give meaning to and find significance in the world. I worry that with phenomenological research, phenomenology is being made to fit into the world it tried to change, that it is being civilised, domesticated.

Moran (2000) is just one of the writers who retell the story of how phenomenology came to France. Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir are having a drink on the left bank with Raymond Aron. They are drinking apricot cocktails. Aron looks at his glass and tells Sartre that if he were a phenomenologist, he could look at this wine glass and make philosophy out of it. Sartre turned pale with emotion and rushed down to a bookshop to buy a text on phenomenology. The thought I wish to leave my readers with is to do with what I call the apricot cocktail test. Can we imagine Sartre, (or anyone else, come to that) leaving their cocktails to rush down to the bookshop to buy an edition of a book on qualitative phenomenological research? S

Onel Brooks was completing a doctorate in philosophy when he began working in the field of psychotherapy. He trained as a social worker, then as a psychotherapist. He is a UKCP-registered and BACP-Accredited Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist in independent practice, and a Senior Lecturer in Psychotherapy, Counselling and Counselling Psychology at the University of Roehampton, where he contributes to the Research Centre for Therapeutic Education, which is in the Psychology Department. He is a member of the Philadelphia Association and contributes to the training there.

References

Cioffi, F. (1998) *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer*, Cambridge, Cambridge: University Press

Finlay, L. (2011) *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell

Freud, S. (2002) *Civilization and its Discontents*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books

Gray, J.G. (1968) 'Introduction', in M. Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, New York: Harper and Row

Heidegger, M. (1966) *Der Spiegel* Interview; available http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~other1/Heidegger%20Der%20Spiegel.pdf (accessed 1 May 2013)

Heidegger, M. (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*, New York: Harper and Row

House, R. (2012) Review of Finlay's *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World*, *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 41 (1): 13–16

Moran, D. (2000) *Introduction to Phenomenology*, London: Routledge

Nietzsche, F. (2004) *The Future of Our Educational Institutions*, Indiana: St Augustine's Press

West, D. (1996) *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy*, Cambridge: Polity Press